

Portland's Committee on Community-Engaged Policing

Subcommittee for People with Mental Illness

Co-Chairs Patrick Nolen & Amanda J. Marshall, JD
Members Stephanie Maya Lopez MD, Bob McCormick, Javonnie Shearn, Deandre Kenyanjui PSS, CRM, Meredith Mathis, Mark Schorr LPC, CADC I, Timothy Roessel

To Danielle Outlaw & Ted Wheeler

Recommendation on Condolences

On May 22, Portland's Community-Engaged Policing Committee's Subcommittee for People with Mental Illness, along with guests and members of the public, spoke with Donna Martin, sister of Andre Gladen, who was killed by Portland police officer Consider Vosu on January 6.

Ms. Martin expressed that uncertainty over how her brother was killed was difficult for her family, "Not knowing how your loved one was feeling at the time. Was compassion expressed to him? Was the situation evaluated to the best of the officer's ability?" Donna later expressed "We can't heal, because we don't know the truth."

Ms. Martin told the subcommittee about Gladen's family meeting with Ted Wheeler and Danielle Outlaw. Both assured Gladen's family a proper investigation would be carried out. The Chief offered condolences, but Ms. Martin heard them as half hearted. It would be better to have both a carefully crafted written apology and a face to face meeting where sincere sentiments could be expressed.

The day the district attorney decided not to pursue criminal indictment against Vosu, Andre Gladen's family traveled again to Portland. His mother, who had difficulty traveling due to her COPD, was among the group on their way to Portland to be informed of the verdict. While on their way, Gladen's mother received a phone call from an assistant district attorney, who immediately broke the news that the officer would not be indicted. The family expressed feeling deeply disrespected by this abrupt shift in communication, as it was their understanding they would hear the news in person. A face to face meeting, unless undesired by surviving loved ones or potentially unsafe, could be a requirement when significant news is being delivered.

It is the subcommittee's understanding no apology was made to the Gladen family since the grand jury decision about Consider Vosu.

PCCEP co-chair Lakayana Drury asked Ms. Martin what justice would look like for her and for her family - what she would like to have happen moving forward. Ms. Martin said her idea of justice was not radically different from other surviving community members of individuals killed by the police. She asked that leaders admit there was a failure, admit there is something wrong with the way these police encounters with civilians end. She asked that when police officers encounter a person in need, like Andre, they consider a community will miss them if they are taken, consider they have ties to loved ones, and a future to lead. She asked that measures are taken so this preventable tragedy will not happen again, such as a reliable alternative crisis response.

One person killed by police force is one too many. But given the pattern we have experienced in Portland, this repeating tragedy reaches far beyond one death. Because of this fact, it makes sense some norms be adopted to recognize surviving families and acknowledge their grief.

Here is a recommendation from the subcommittee.

Make it Bureau practice for the Chief, as soon as feasible after use of lethal force to send a written letter of condolence to the victim's family and offer a meeting with family members to recognize and acknowledge their grief and loss. Make it Bureau policy for a licensed grief counselor to be made available to family members as soon as possible.

If force results in death, or serious injury, the Portland Police Bureau practice should be that both the mayor and the chief of police publicly acknowledge a tragedy has occurred, and acknowledge any preventable death or serious injury as a failure on the part of our city's leaders.

A personal apology should be made to the surviving family, community members, or to the victim if they are still alive. If those affected want an apology in person, it should be given in person. Because an apology is only substantive with action, a concrete change should be made, and carried out, with transparency to the satisfaction of surviving parties. At the end of the day, Andre Gladen, and all others who have died at the hands of Portland Police officers cannot return to their lives. Anyone who has been severely injured by Portland Police officers, or has lost family to lethal force cannot unlive that trauma. In the face of that reality, a substantive apology, at the very least, is owed to community members.

“I am sorry this had to happen,” is very different from “I am sorry that this happened. Your son’s life mattered, your loss matters, and we are going to do everything in our power to stop this from happening to someone else.”

The death of a young African American community member experiencing a mental health crisis is tragic and did not have to happen. For the community to have any kind of trust in the Portland Police Bureau and in the leaders of the City of Portland, these deaths cannot be treated as inevitable. There needs to be recognition of grief and loss, and there needs to be change.

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